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Dodecaphonic Scales

Merle E. Brown

I

When the poet finished reading his "The Secret of Poetry" with the lines

I suppose you are secretly lonely,
thinking of death, thinking of love.

I'd like, please, to leave on your sill
just one cold flower, whose beauty

would leave you inconsolable all day.
The secret of poetry is cruelty.

the girl said: But who is this "you" you keep talking about? It is not me. Your poetry is not cruel to me. The delight with which you make your grand pronunciamiento is not cruel except to the self you think you are. But it is not cruel even to you. You are inviting me into your poem. I know you are desperate and desolate and in love with your isolation. But that's only because you are so afraid of what you desire. You need me in your poem so that you will never again have to use that anonymous you. And I accept your invitation. It is so easy for me to enter your poem, because my life is a poem, is living at odds with but at one with men like you, but only if they have the courage to break out of their self-indulgent delight in their own sorrowful loneliness. Your poetry isn't cruel, but only timid. I am ready when you are. Poetry is a destructive force. Let it, then, destroy your "Romantic tenements of rose and ice." But don't think, if you let me in, that I will just be "a woman dancing, a woman/Combing." Your poem of the act of the mind must accept not just my body, but also my mind. I shall retain my independence as you yours. No poet without a muse or muse without a poet. We shall be two in one or one in two, not just two voices, but two centers of love and choice and feeling and gesture. I'll join you, but only in a double lyric, in which the cruelty of poetry is at one with its generosity, its pain a humming of joy.

This girl, no critic at all, is speaking not just to Jon Anderson, the author of "The Secret of Poetry," but also to the other nine poets included in this venture. She is so rash as to talk back, to cajole, to advise—as certainly no critic, and least of all I, would be—because she is a phantom born in the

future of these poems. She is the not quite actual second birth of the births of these poems.

Critics who prophesy, who tell poets where they should go next, are just plain fools. But if a critic hears the undersong of a prophecy in a poem, is he not then under obligation to voice it? It is, of course, possible that he is hearing not the undersong of the poem, but only the echo of the cry of his own desire. He must beware of his ear as those who hear his voicing of what he hears must beware of his voice. But if he won't at least try to speak of what is unheard-of in poetry, then he has no right to be a critic, whose job is to speak of the dream of criticism, that is, of poetry, of that dream within the dream of poetry, which is the invisible forward thrust not just of the poetry, but of the lives of us all, freighted with the fate of our future, with the chance of our living creatively into that future instead of lapsing back into the debris of the past.

To be sure, inaudible undersongs are not so easy to substantiate. Before making the effort, let me sketch out a curve in relation to which I am reading these poems, a curve these poems themselves evoke as I read them. The most striking thing about the poems is that the central self in each is so sharply delimited, whether it is identified as I, you, or he, and whether it is treated as a fictional *persona* or as the poet's own self. This self is not presented ironically, so that the reader does not turn away from it to a speaker who is qualitatively at odds with it. Humor, sarcasm, hate, pity, love, cool observation, even indifference, are all finally self-directed. Gregory Orr writes about "The man in the mirror suit" as the man in the mirror suit. Is this characteristic of contemporary poetry? That's not what I said. It only seems more or less characteristic of these ten poets.

If his gaze could be averted from his phantom girl, the poet would respond to my claim that his poems are based on a non-ironically and sharply delineated central self, first, by agreeing readily, then by explaining: beneath that central self is something that matters even more than that self. Since Wordsworth, the central self of lyric poetry has tended to spill itself sloppily all over the world. Consider "Tintern Abbey" or "The Old Cumberland Beggar." In both, the poet strives to go out of himself, to identify himself with "the light of setting suns,/And the round ocean and the living air,/And the blue sky." But in these two poems Wordsworth fails to make his escape. Both poems conclude with a direct address, in one to his "dear, dear sister," in the other to politicians, but in neither is the poet joined by those to whom he speaks. Both poems end in absolute silence. The sister, the politicians, refuse to utter a word, so that the poems turn back upon the harrowing isolation of the poet. And the poet, both as speaker and listener, is sharply defined in his isolation. Thereafter, Wordsworth was on the run from such horror. And most poets and novelists since Wordsworth have run with him, either by straining to be an impersonal, transcendental eyeball or by spreading their eddying flesh like syrup all over their world. Think even of Conrad, hiding below his Marlow. How few exceptions there are: Pound at times, in the Pisan Cantos, which by their sharp delimitedness reveal the inflatedness of the cantos preceding

them; Williams in "Desert Music"; Lowell in the *Life Studies*. What is truly new in my poetry is the acuteness of my attention, the accuracy of the way in which I listen to myself. I am not puffing breathily, projectively, as an indefinable I to an indefinable you. The dispersive, outward reaching of cosmic poetry, moreover, doesn't in fact introduce other persons into Olson's poems any more than Creeley's breathing does into his. So, grant that all of O'Hara's recording of the processes of his mental experience presents only the processes of his mental experiences. At least he presents himself. As trivial as that self may be, it is more interesting than a Whitmanesque swamp. What truly matters in my poetry—and you have heard very little of this since Wordsworth—is that I am actually listening, as the individual I am, to the speech of the individual I am. One thing a good Workshop can teach a poet is how to listen to himself. That is what I have learned. In this sense alone, my poetry is Workshop Poetry. And its novelty should not be minimized. I admit that in my austerity I have excluded the girl, that my poems lack the presence, the opulence, of Stevens' "Fat girl, terrestrial." My poems are not richly earthy. They are not, I confess, capacious. But it's more important to say: They are not false.

As a critic, I can reply: Yes, this is an arc within the curve evoked for me by your poetry. Your poems are not evasive, inflated, obscurantist. Yes, you do listen to yourself unflinchingly. Yes, though small, the self that both speaks and listens in your poems is authentic. Yes, its very smallness makes the elaborate structures and the evasive playfulness of most contemporary fiction seem totally fictitious. But the deprivation caused by your success is a cry for something else. Your willingness to be private, to write lines that say to the reader, Look, this is none of your damn business—don't you sense the violence in your very truthfulness to yourself? Don't you glimpse the phantom hidden in this cruelty to yourself? Aren't you on the verge of giving birth, along with your own speaking and listening self, to another speaking and listening self, to poems I certainly cannot imagine—if I could, I would be trying to write them—but can only point toward with an uncertain phrase like "double lyrics"?

I know the difficulty of talking about a phantom of the future, and can only return to my sense of its vivid presence as embedded, as incipient, in the violence of your self-defined privacy. To find even a hint as to what this new poetry might be like, I must go back to times when poets actually write poems to and for living persons. The anonymous audiences for which poets have written these many years, because of the nature of publication and distribution, provoke the cosmically evasive poetry against which you are reacting. I know. Even the staff of a magazine like *The Iowa Review*, with its embarrassingly restricted circulation, is extremely vague about the nature of its readers (Dear anonymous reader, please subscribe). Yes, your decision to turn your back on the anonymous audience, even on the audience that might hear you read your own poems at a poetry reading, and to write privately for one other person whom you call you, yes, this does look like a creative decision. I'm not questioning it, but only asking: After one writes as sharply for an individual as you have, composing such private poems to a girl who is excluded from

the poems themselves, isn't the next move one of inviting her in? I have no idea how this can be brought about, but hear the need of its happening as the cry of your poems. Spenser's and Shakespeare's finest sonnets include as active, self-aware presences the very persons to and for whom they write. Their dramatic, doubly creative lyrics represent a leap beyond the fact of their actually writing those sonnets for a loved and understood person. Though there is such a leap between the situation and the poems, could the poems have been composed if the situation had been other than it was? Hasn't your decision to turn away from the well-paying crowd and back to a real person as your audience put you into a situation much like Spenser's and Shakespeare's, or Petrarch's and Dante's?

Aren't you now ready, because of the austerity of your self-delimitation and your privacy, aren't you just the one and only poet who can draw into your poetry the great forces of narrative fiction, as it drew the forces of romantic poetry into itself in the works of George Eliot, Dickens, Conrad, Lawrence and Joyce? I am not suggesting that you write sonnets or narrative poems. What would a "double lyric" be? I don't know, except that it would include at least two personal, creative centers, each independently attentive and articulate, both finally at one in their doubleness. I doubt that your poems will resemble objective narrative or drama. The self of the poems you are now writing is too complicated for such forms. Add a second self and you exceed my imagination. It is impossible, unheard-of, and that is the reason you will do it, in whatever way you will. Impossible? Well, Dante does something like this again and again and Chaucer does it too. They create characters who are their own judges, fully self-aware; they both affirm and judge those characters, and yet are themselves affirmed and judged in turn by them, as if they are created by their own creations. Tolstoy certainly does this in *Anna Karenina*, as is apparent just as soon as one realizes that the Tolstoy who observes Levin is himself Levin as he observes Anna, even when the character Levin is absent from the scene. Lawrence does much the same with Birkin. And Faulkner with Quentin. No, what is impossible is the only thing that can and must be done.

II

I hope it is clear that I am not writing about "young poets" with a future. These are not young poets in that sense. Their future is incipient within their poems. My sense of what they can and must do is evoked by these poems in which they do not do what they can and must do. It is the absent lure, the inaudible undersong, the deep anguish, the cause of their violence and isolation.

What if it was destined, beyond the intentions of Michael Ryan or the participants, that these poems should be linked with these responses as making up together the rough drafts of poems of the future? The responses, as

any reader will recognize, are quite extraordinary. Every one is engaged with its subject directly, unaffectedly, with sympathy, with a surprising lack of public posturing. They are by no means written with the left hand, but are related closely to the poetry of their author.

Let me begin with the poems, those of Stanley Plumly, which satisfy me least, partly indeed because they seem most complete, most whole, uniform in tone and manner, undisturbed and undisrupted. No doubt weak lines, lines that come too easily in relation to their context, can be found even in them, like "in the middle of the way" and "walked the water, like a son" in the "Dreamsong." But, as wholes, the poems are very smooth. They are underwater poems, sleepy poems, undisturbed by the cutting edge of a questioning attention. They are self-absorbed, possibly self-indulgent. Except for the central self, as I or you, the figures within the poem are drifting "face down" or are fixed with formulas, like "The wife of the doors, the woman of rooms." Surely there is no "other" in these poems, whatever Maura Stanton in her kindness says. That other which is "one wife, one wife, one wife," as one wife and also three wives is at bottom no wife, no other, but only an object, only debris drifting downstream. The poems are opaque, not because one can't enter them, but because, when one does, he has entered not into Plumly's world, but, to quote Thom Gunn, into that "dark,/wide realm where we/walk with everyone," but with no awareness on the part of the poet that he has led us into so undistinguished, so undefined and unformed and unforceful a place.

Maura Stanton's comments support these claims in an indirect way. She speaks of the poems in the language of the poems, using painfully vague and undelimited terms like "body" and "sleep" and "death" just as they are used in the poems. She does not clarify, but sympathizes. To say what she says, she must abandon herself, along with her keen sense of language, so manifest in her poems. In effect, she is saying: Listen, I recognize your desire to be muffled and in hiding, and I will not meet you as myself, sharply, questioningly, on that issue. I will just talk of your poems as if I were your poems. For the occasion, I will hide too. I respect your privacy. If you can stand it, I will leave it intact.

The trouble, as I see it, is that Plumly, in his own words, has indeed lost "the secret of sleep." To lose the secret of sleep is to be obsessed with recurrent events or images. The secret of sleep is that from the inside it is dreaming. The secret of dreaming, contrary to the popular psychological theories that lock us in their clichés, is that it is next to impossible to distinguish from waking. It is, of course, distinct from our dream, our myth, of waking: our insipid notion that to be awake is to understand life within the structures of the managerial intellect, plotting, arranging, keeping things in order, in an order on the basis of which we judge our dreams to be dreams because they do not fit into our concrete structures of waking, but fit rather into fluid structures that we concretize as part of our structures for diagnosis. But our waking structures, both those to order our waking and those to order our sleeping, these are forms of black magic put together to keep us

from really dreaming or really waking. Psychiatry is an arm of social and even governmental coercion. It trivializes the nature of dreaming, as our leaders trivialize us by treating us as children. Real dreaming overcomes the death of institutionalized waking only because it is as rich and vital and aware as real waking. The real dreamer is fully alert, self-aware, dramatically engaged with others who are dreams because alive rather than structured and concretized. The real dreamer knows that he dreams; he even interprets his dreams as part of his dreams; that is why he is also awake. The person who is fully awake knows that he dreams; that is why he is a real dreamer. The real dreamer never stops his dream conversations when he leaves his bed; if he did, he would die into the clichés of those structures that are meant to manage us. To dream, to wake, is to be unmanageable, to be creative, to be vitally in control in our acts of making and yet in relation to another, whose acts of making are controlled independently of our own control. The secret of sleep is that it is waking, that its necessities are not obsessions. Plumly is caught in a false dualism, dreaming the bad dream in his poems, waking the bad waking in his prose.

The lack of an attentive edge in Plumly's poems is similar to the limits of his prose. For all the perceptive things he says about Louise Glück's poems, it should be clear that they are mainly at odds with what Glück herself says about her poems. And she is extremely acute about herself. Plumly likes to go for a big formula, like "confrontation," and this weakness leads to his excessive claim that Glück is writing these recent poems out of a negative capability which evokes a twin. Actually, the poems of *Firstborn* show more "negative capability" than these recent poems do. In *Firstborn* Glück would often adopt the stance of another and write straight out of that center. The poems are egocentric, but fictitiously so, based on the wish to abandon oneself in order to enter another, violent because of the unavoidable falseness of that effort. Now, as Plumly says, she accepts her own voice as that out of which she must write. As she herself says, her poems are less violent now because she expects less of them. She no longer expects, that is, to cross over from herself to another. She is quite right, I believe, to call "The Pond" narcissistic. The other is not other in that poem, nor in the other poems printed here. Even in "For My Mother," where she strains to identify her foetal bliss with her mother's marriage bliss, and her own 30-year-old alienation with her mother's "impene-trable despair," one misses all sense of the otherness of the mother, of her independent awareness as at one with but distinct from the poet's.

Even though written in the first person, these poems share a limitation with the poems of *Firstborn*. In the early poems she strove to establish an objective situation within which a character would speak. Isn't she still trying for much the same thing? Instead of an objective situation, she now waits to begin till she has a myth, an idea, to govern what might have been an individual and living situation of which she is a part, but what, because of the myth, turns out to be rather conventional and typical. Against this deep error of invention, she then is forced to strain unduly with her language, going for

an effect that in the end is purely verbal, as in "the sunlight/Chipping at the curtains" or in the last four lines of "For My Mother." Her claim that these last lines are based on the Sleeping Beauty fable is, I feel, an act of violence topping an act of violence, the one structural, the other stylistic. Clearly she has a sense of self-limitation, as Plumly, who cannot recognize the absence of an other in her poems, does not. But she thinks that this limitation requires of her that she build up her poems out of something objectively delimited. Whereas I am suggesting that the creative move called for by her superbly sharp awareness of the limits of herself is a poem not limited by an objective situation or fable, not limited spatially, as "out there," but rather limited dramatically. The poem I glimpse her working toward is one that overcomes her new sense of limitedness just because of that sense of limitedness, one that works out of her deep sense of loss by way of that very sense of loss. What will this new poem look like? I shall not be fool enough to succumb to that temptation. Imagine a blank space after this sentence in which she and her phantom other sketches out that marvel. . . . The limits of critics are too obvious to try to conceal.

Will she be helped if she asks how it is that she can enter so intimately and objectively into what she calls the solitary and ego-bound poems of Gregory Orr? She remains very much herself in these comments. Otherwise, how could she like best the "Poem" beginning "I will lose you" instead of the "Poem" beginning "Before he passes," of which she speaks so sensitively, or "His Room," into which she walks so boldly, against the very nature of the poem as she describes it? How she loves the inexorableness of that "I shall lose you," content not to question the blankness of that "you," the fact that that "you" cannot be lost poetically, because it has never been found poetically. Won't she consider that nothing can be lost unless it is found, that loss in and of itself is just a variation on the indulgence of hugging one's sweet self?

The reason both she and Gregory Orr will object to these comments is that they will think he is being urged to abandon the mysterious empty stoniness of his poems, the magic relation of the man of mirrors with the stones he passes, or the vivid hollowness of his relation to the black walls of his room or to "the suit hanging over him/like a chandelier, a tree of cold light." Of course, Orr should not, cannot, violate that stony emptiness. It is at the very heart of the poems, is the reason Glück dislikes the noisy and full "Some Things" as a violation of Orr's gift. Orr writes of a stone as a stone, and is at his finest in these brief, cryptic, coldly descriptive poems written of the man of mirrors by the man of mirrors. When he tries to sound like Hughes' Crow, in certain stone poems not represented here, straining for outrageous humor, he is quite out of his range, I believe. No, Orr must not abandon the hollowness of his faint drum beat. The trouble with his Crow-like poems about the Stone and the Wound is not that they are too stony, but rather the opposite. If he recognizes that the stone in his poems is finally his way of experiencing and perceiving and writing and not just the object about which he writes, then won't he

be able to let the Wound come up against his empty stone world without its being cracked?

Consider, for instance, the brilliantly stony and objective way in which he writes about the surgingly emotional poems of Maura Stanton. How aloof he remains with this talk about religious ritual and "a kind of psychic scapegoat." How personally isolated he is in the despair of his conclusion: "It is 'song,' the woven tapestry of speech, which offers some possibility of release." It seems unimaginable to me that Maura Stanton can be content to be a scapegoat or to accept as her only consolation the consolation of her song. No one is more urgently trying to drag another person into poems than she is, to bring her life into oneness with her poetry. Her first volume will be entitled *Dowry* and dedicated to her husband. If she fails, the cause is her emotional violence (in contrast to Glück's verbal violence). That, in turn, depends on her insistence that the self-consciousness she feels when she speaks is a plague. Without abandoning what she calls her "sometimes baroque" style, isn't it clear that she must suffer the shame of dragging that self-consciousness into her poems? It may indeed result in her poems including some dumbness along with the finely articulate and Stevensian "I grow dumb." She may be forced to admit some of Orr's hollowness, with its faintly beating drum, into lines now so cruelly devouring of both others and herself. Her fear and hatred of her child, her in-laws, her own tongue, will not be destroyed but will be enlivened and dramatized if she opens herself, self-consciously, to a poetic and living love of what is threatening and fearsome in its otherness. The fear, so pervasive traditionally among American poets, that if one becomes capacious as a result of intense self- and other-awareness, then the intensity of one's narrowness and confinement will be lost: shouldn't *The Bridge* have put an end to such fear forever? Stanton could have written of Plumly's poems both sympathetically and with lucid reservations. Emotional intensity and lucid self-awareness cancel each other out only in the bad dream and the bad waking, not in the authentic alertness of true dreaming or in the richly intense dreams of true waking.

III

In an early poem, Wallace Stevens gives this advice, with courteous in-direction, to philosophers who think hard in the dark cuffs of their cloaks:

It might well be that their mistress
Is no gaunt fugitive phantom.
She might, after all, be a wanton,
Abundantly beautiful, eager,

Fecund,
From whose being by starlight, on sea-coast,
The innermost good of their seeking
Might come in the simplest of speech.

Imagine the delight, then, with which a philosopher—if I may adopt that somber title for a moment—takes this advice and turns it back upon ten young poets. The mistress of their poems may be so gaunt as to be invisible. But at least in the poets still to be discussed the sense of her absence is vividly felt as a fugitive phantom. Indeed, in one of the poems, Thomas Lux's "No Possibility of Articulation," she is actually present as a living other, though in the disguise of a horse, a black horse. Both Lux and Norman Dubie claim that this poem really says nothing. After all, a horse can speak no better than an ant. But Lux's horse is the silent listener of the poem. As the horse's pain spreads so evenly as to become "only a faint hum," the horse experiences that shift from algedonic to hedonic tone, from pain to joy. Lux himself fails to recognize this change in the living other of his poem; as a result, he falls back casually, in the last stanza, on the rather limp pain at "the centers of our lives." But his own defective hearing is dramatically at odds with the attentiveness of the horse, as its rippling pain turns into joy. Lux says he is dissatisfied with the poem. "Fuck sadness." But he needn't speak like a horse. The horse in its silence has already conveyed that emotion in a form too fine to be called horsy.

There is no Hart Crane in Lux's poem on Crane. Thus, it is reasonable for Dubie to think that Crane is an arrow, a meteor, and a fish, and for Lux to deny these metamorphoses and to be ashamed of the poem because "it's not nearly big enough to explain how I feel about Hart Crane as a poet and as a man." Of all the poets represented here, Lux is, I think, the closest to evoking a fecund other. Why else would he cancel out the last line of "The Day of the Lacuna," which Dubie quotes: "You could be wrong." I grant that the line is redundant, mannered, even cute. The notion that the you of the poem might be wrong in thinking that the woman on the other side of the lake is not saying goodbye is obvious without the line. Lux's doubt that this woman, his mistress, will actually become fecund for him does not, however, undermine his joy at her presence. Even if she ceased to be gaunt and fugitive and became abundantly beautiful and eager, she would be wanton and thus not to be trusted. If a poet is actually to give birth in a poem to an authentic other, it will be in part because he has accepted the likelihood that another person, once admitted into his poem, will betray him. The person would not be other if she were incapable of that. After all, didn't Lux's horse betray him? Isn't Lux unique among these poets as the one courageous enough to create what has shown him up as a fool?

Of all the authors' responses to their critics, Lux's is the only one firmly based on a conviction that he could be, that he is, right. Listen to what he himself says about "No Possibility of Articulation": "I don't like the poem. I have a lot

of sympathy for the horse in the second stanza but no sympathy, really, for the narrator." And he is right. He has beaten me to it. He knows the horse has made him look foolish. The strength of Lux's response comes out of the rather obvious fact that there's no chance of one's being wrong unless there is also the chance of his being right. Lux takes the risk of being wrong by believing, even somewhat brashly, that he is right. Such bright assurance makes the other poets' responses seem reserved, slightly evasive, tinged with grey.

In his poems, too, Lux accepts himself, loves himself and thus stands forth more solidly than the others. He is delighted with his own idiocy in "There Are Many Things That Please Me." This is why he is, like the sun, spilling his somewhat silver disdain for his own weaknesses. Even in this poem, which in its zany effervescence reminds one of Tate, as the other two poems do not, this self-acceptance, with the solidity it gives, makes the poem quite different from any poem Tate has written.

But Tate is on the move. In *The Oblivion Ha-Ha* and in many of the poems in *Absences*, he is content to flip off association after association, crazily, evasively. It might seem that such antics, such versatility in his leaps, reveal an unusually rich self. But such richness depends on more than speed, change, and leaping. There must be a listener and a shaper; at some depth there must be a controlling pulse, if evasive flight is also to be directed strength. Tate realizes this strength, ceases to be content simply to disintegrate over and over, with the extremely fine sequence that is the title poem of his latest volume, *Absences*. The same strength is manifest in the poem printed here which Lux likes most, "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)." Tate is zipping around as much as ever in this poem, but with a new self-awareness, the attention of a man truly listening to himself. What he hears and in his hearing shapes is that he can't speak for the wind because he is the wind, is that very coldness that chips away at him and from which he is frantically in flight. To recognize that one is the wind, to discover that empty violence in one's very heart, is to be no longer merely windy and violent. The empty windiness whips through the poem under the control of the inaudible pulse of his awareness. Such complexity is what it means to be a person; without that there is no possibility of evoking another.

I doubt that "Cruisin' Even" is as mysterious as Tate says it is for him. Isn't the poem basically Tate's rather self-indulgent claim that he is another Franz Kafka? Another victim but "miraculously unweary of understanding"? I grant that he is embarrassed by the arrogance of this, as his use of "cuddly" indicates. He is, with this purported identification, just trying to cheer himself up. And yet, isn't he asserting his superiority to the "chain-gang of such wretches" in his claim that he knows he belongs to it? And isn't such understanding the basis of his claim that he is just like Kafka? Yes and no, I suppose. It's a slippery self Tate exhibits here, a sleight-of-hand man, both arrogant and afraid of his arrogance. Would greater assurance decrease his variety and exuberance? Does Lux like "I Can't Speak for the Wind" because it is least like Tate and most like himself? Maybe. Even so, I

don't think Tate will dry up if he listens more sharply to himself. His "Absences" is much more distinctively his own than the less keenly heard sequences, in *Absences*, which at times sound derivative from Roethke or Stevens.

From the conversation between Tate and Welch, it might seem that Tate has done Welch a disservice by convincing him that he should loosen up and experiment. The three poems printed here are not the equal of the better poems in *Riding the Earthboy* 40. But Welch is in transit. As he says in his comments on Myers, he now finds "leaving" to be the "ideal motion." He has left the experience he knows with feeling and entered into words emptied of being. So thorough is this change that one does not even miss felt experience in

November, another birthday—
Ouzo man, where is your lover gone?

One is not disturbed that these are just words, because, by the end of the poem, it is clear that words are all one is being given. "Shouldn't the dead/honor each other." "I touched her hip. The day fired." Words, just words. So Tate is right to point out the vowel sounds. But Welch is aware of this too. The sad jauntiness with which he concludes his comments on his own poems: "Well, I know a lot of new things now, how many pounds in a kilo, the difficulties of getting a car you brought into Greece out of Greece . . . I could write about these things," indicates that he knows he does not know these things in such a way as to make poems out of them. Tate's real advice to Welch is implicit in his comments on "Birthday in Saronis." Welch must work to integrate what he knows with feeling, his experience of being disinherited, and his cold, unfelt verbal play, the experience of being one of the abandoned with the abandonment of linguistic experiment. This advice coincides with Welch's own feelings. He "could write about these things," but why bother, what does it all matter? It won't do to be leaving unless one is also always returning. The dissoluteness of simply leaving, though of value in transition, is a temptation to be resisted, one Tate himself is overcoming in recent poems, one which Welch is surely aware he too must work against.

The one conventional idea at odds with such awareness is Welch's belief that one writes poems to have an impact on the unknown reader. His discussion of Myers' poems, like Myers' discussion of Anderson's poems, is based on this assumption. To write poems for this kind of empty abstraction, for "the reader," is identical with thinking that "leaving" is the "ideal motion." It is dissolute and disintegrative. It turns a poem into a bag of rhetorical tricks, strategies for gaining momentum. To think of a poem in this way blinds one to the emptiness of a heavily vowelised line like "Ouzo man, where is your lover gone?" A line like that would fit nicely into a popular song, where voice and accompaniment provide the body lacking in the words. But it does no effective work at all in a poem. To write for an abstraction like the reader is to substitute a fictitious ear for one's own real ear. It may be, as Jon Anderson says, that every poem "is a human voice which longs for company." But longing for company is subverted by the desire to have an impact on an abstraction. Only if a poet listens directly to

himself will he have a chance to introduce another listener into his poem as genuine company.

It is difficult to believe that Jack Myers had any listener at all in mind for his first volume of poetry, *Black Sun Abraxas*. In his new poems, however, he compensates amply, indeed too amply. He is torn between two listeners, the unknown reader, the one who buys books, on whom he would have an impact, and the known reader, himself, his wife, a friend he understands. As his essay on Anderson indicates, he thinks poets write to that fiction we call actual readers. There are clauses in his poems clearly intended for this unreality: "isn't it always night"; "does this go all the way?" (a borrowing from Merwin). "The Family War" is vitiated by his indecisiveness about his audience. There is too much attention in the first two stanzas to the anonymous reader, on whom he would have an impact, for his turn toward his father in the third to be effective. That is, even though ostensibly speaking to his father, he turns back to us unknowns and flaps his lips at us with "like a grey slug/from the big guns ready to explode." The problem may be that, even with a domestic subject, Myers cannot write a domestic poem. Or, he wants to turn the family into a television show. The strength of "How to Get Outside" and "Leaving" is that the conflict is actually at work as part of the poems. Like Welch, Myers does think "leaving" is the "ideal motion." And yet, along with his wife, he swears "this is the last time/our kids will see their friends/as broken toys." The limit of the poem is that the friends are just broken toys, they have no presence, so there is really nothing the leaving moves away from. The reason Welch can like these poems even though they are domestic is that Myers forgets to take a good look at the kitchen before he sprints out of it. If the TV set is in the kitchen, then it may be unlikely that a 440 man would take time to observe the nature of the place. Even so, Myers is not entirely happy with the speed of his leaving. He may believe that his guiding rule is "Finish it, you bastard!" But he also knows that the advice depends on the importance of the race. If it is just a leaving, if only a "blackness shining at the end" lies ahead, if that anonymous audience is just a nothing, even before it is blown up with the TNT of one's stunning lines, well, then, what's it all for? Is the poet just an ant tunnelling toward another ant "with your face"? These metaphors are in tune with the clichés of our time. Myers knows it, luckily. He himself observes that the face disappears as he looks at it, that it is a figment of the mass imagination. If he looks hard enough at the blackness, it ought to turn into something else, maybe a horse, and then into a person other than himself.

The very limits of the poems of Welch and Myers combine to make up the strengths of Norman Dubie's most recent poems. As Dubie himself says—I'm revising only slightly—he works for strong clear statements which are obscure in the sense that they say, "Look, this is none of your business." These are poems that advertise their privacy. Their floors are ceilings; that is, the poet in the room of his poem is aware of the presence of a reader in a room below him. Or, as in another poem, he thinks of his readers as rats gnawing in the walls of his room. A fear, a hatred, of his reader makes him refuse to let even his daughter into the

clarity of his poems, except as a sawdust resemblance. As Anderson says, one responds to the poems as most professional. But they are by no means simply verbal. Their force is in their refusal to reveal, is a clarity which also suggests that what is clear does not matter at all compared to what is concealed. In a culture in which everyone thinks he has everyone else's number, since an ant is an ant, after all, poems of such privacy are quite a triumph. Analyze any one of these poems down to its minutest detail, clarify its meanings as fully as possible, and you will then come upon a wall of fire called fear which will consume your labors as if they were sawdust. Put another way, if you come too close to the poems, they will smack you in the face. They are offensive poems because in such fear of being offended. Dubie says that his most recent volume, *The Illustrations*, from which the poems printed here come, frees him to continue to write and that he wants to write some love poems. That makes perfect sense. Having built up a private self in this volume, a self whose secrets are not to be plumbed because their concealment is the very essence of the poems, Dubie should be capable of recognizing another private self. And this self, unlike the public selves of the readers he despises, will be a self for whom he writes his love. Poems of love including two private, secretive lovers, each full of reserve even before the other? The speech will be simple and for all its secrecy will reveal "the innermost good of our seeking." Having heard it, we may be able to hear the finest of Stevens' later poems in a new way.

The result of the turn Jon Anderson makes, in "The Secret of Poetry," from his own loneliness to the loneliness of his "you": "I suppose you are secretly lonely,/thinking of death, thinking of love," is that the you is so close to entering the poem as an individual listener that it prickles the skin. No, finally, the you is blocked out, so that Myers has grounds for saying it is really us. But only the jolt of possibility in the turn Anderson takes, making one peer to see what never appears, permits him to make his grand pronunciamiento, "The secret of poetry is cruelty," without seeming silly. If the statement were made directly to us, without that hovering sense that an actual, loved individual is hearing him before we do, the line would be pretentious and inflated. The poem just barely succeeds, and it is not so great because the you is finally excluded.

Much the same is true of "Refusals." The you of the poem is, of course, Anderson himself, not Myers, as Myers thinks. He is insisting throughout the poem on the unavoidable loneliness of writing poetry, of the necessary exclusion from his poems of his wife and friends. Yet how close he comes to evoking them in their otherness by insisting on their exclusion. Many of his most recent poems show this concern for the friends he is excluding from the very poems in which the concern is expressed. They are, I agree, truly excluded, even Steve in "For Steve" and John Clare in "John Clare." Anderson can put a person into a poem with fine discrimination, but not so as to give him independent otherness. To do that he must provide him with the doubleness he continues to reserve for himself, the doubleness, for instance, of "Refusals," in which Anderson is both the you and the poet talking about the you. Each of us is alive as a human being only when living this doubleness actively.

Note, moreover, that the actual speaker of "Refusals" is not only self-aware, but also aware of others, the wife and friends of himself as you. With such awareness Anderson goes beyond the isolation of himself as a speaking psychosomatic organism, beyond the loneliness he delights in. He does not push his awareness as far as he might, convinced as he is that a poem "is a human voice which longs for company." That, I believe, is inaccurate, even though in a sense true to the poems Anderson is now writing. But even his poems are more than "a human voice." The listener, the shaper, is also vividly though inaudibly present, and is finally responsible for the exclusion of company so that the voice must long for it. In life as in poetry, we live in company only because we listen to and observe and think about others intricately and creatively. If we don't create our friends and lovers, as having a creative doubleness like our own, then we will remain in isolation, indeed in an unrealized, non-human loneliness, for genuine loneliness depends on one's creative sense of a loved other from whom he is cut off. In both Dubie's and Anderson's poems, there is a curious lack of loneliness, caused by the psychic isolation they ground their words in. Along with Lux, they both seem close to breaking beyond that abstraction and creating a human community that includes at least one other person a separateness from whom would cause authentic loneliness. Of course, friends of the poets may assure them that their poems include the very things I find to be absent. But I agree with Myers that Anderson should beware of his friends, and I include Myers as one of them. I exclude myself, however. Poets do not include critics among their friends.

Supposing Anderson's girl has heard any of this, she might add: What I like best about your avuncular criticism, professor, is your conviction that you could be wrong, all wrong, in what you hear and say. Indeed, you are so convincing that I doubt very much my own existence, except as part of your private fantasia. Shouldn't you have provided space at the end of this essay where the poets could explain to you your non-existence? You will, I know, reply that, of course you don't exist, that you are only in the act of becoming, moving into a phantasmal future that includes me in my otherness, that may, that just may, turn into reality. Well, that pleases me too. Perhaps you should keep going, in the hope that you are not just leaving, that your longing is to be not simply no one, but two at least.